

ROBERT E. VARDEMAN

THE BLACK NEBULA

STAR FRONTIER TRILOGY: BOOK THREE



*The vidscreen blazed with destruction
now.*

They had shifted into the solar system at the beginning of the vicious self-extermination games. Norlin hoped the emperor went blind watching such good men and women slaughtered at his whim.

He worked to get the *Preceptor* inward of Saturn's orbit and to the space station circling Earth. Carefully avoiding the larger ships, he corkscrewed over and under the asteroids and thought he had made the perilous journey unscathed when alarms flashed up and down his board.

"Midget battleship detected," barked out Chikako Miza. "Closing fast."

"Full defensives out. They pushed our ECM missile array aside. We're using lasartillery to the fullest. We're beginning to overload. They're throwing everything at us. We're their only target." Sarov's dour voice carried a load of gloom with it. Norlin saw why as he studied the readouts dashing in front of his face. The heads-up display gave him only the highlights of his officers' reports.

He went cold inside when the ship's sensors picked up the visual on the midget battleship.

"That's Emperor Arian's personal ship," he muttered. "We're facing the best ship in the whole damned Empire Service fleet!"

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Robert E. Vardeman

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STAR FRONTIERS BOOK 3

THE BLACK NEBULA



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THE BLACK NEBULA

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Chapter One

The spider-like alien cowered in the corner of his prison cell. Taloned fingers tentatively dragged along the composite material wall, exploring for any small hope of escape. Try as he might, the Kindarian could not scratch the tough material. The stainless steel bars welded over the doorway effectively kept him from overpowering the peculiarly shaped human guard and escaping.

He hunkered down even more and hunched his back, trying to return to the primal-egg position. Never had such shame been heaped upon him. Captured by the enemy! Worse, they had gathered important information from him. Why had he spoken to the lumpy human of the racial home world? He had taken a solemn vow on his spawning web to die before revealing such information.

His compound eyes blurred, the closest he could come to imitating human tears. Frustration and anger mounted. He had betrayed his own kind. He had spoken of the Black Nebula. He had provided coordinates even these curiously autonomous humans could decipher. The only thing he had not spoken of was the Fountain of Spacefaring. If they had asked about this, he would have killed himself to prevent speaking of his race's most holy shrine.

Talons scratched at the wall again. Not even a tiny sliver of the tough material came free. Eyes darting up, he waited for the guard to pass outside. A food tray was shoved under the welded bars for him. He took it to give the illusion of continued cooperation.

Only when he was certain the guard had left, not wanting to endure watching him eat, did he move to the back of the cell. The spot on the wall he had chosen suited him well enough; he had no way of telling what lay in the next compartment. Human spaceships were designed with a half-witted maze of corridors that confused his logical mind and wasted space. They lacked the proper web-shaped interior construction prevalent on all Kindarian battle craft.

He spat some of his digestive juices onto the wall. Using his talon, he concentrated it within a small circle. In seconds, the composite wall bubbled and began to turn tacky. He pushed gently, causing the material to bulge outward. He spat stomach acid in a hosing gush.

Paranoia caused him to pause when noise came from the corridor. A robot repair unit passed by, oblivious to his activity. The guard had not returned to collect his food tray and based on previous feedings would not for hours. He worked faster. His body produced stomach fluid twice a day; he had only a few more minutes of his digestive phase before the glands stopped making the caustic fluid. He would go hungry until the evening feeding—or what he construed as evening.

He could endure. He was a Kindarian warrior. He should have died for his race and hadn't. It was time to redeem himself and perform a noble task worthy of the First Hatchling. He had to strike out against the enemy.

The digestive acid hissed and popped and eventually cut through the carbon composite wall. Sharp talons dug at the edges, hurrying the process. When the hole was only fifty centimeters in diameter, he ran out of digestive juice.

The hole was large enough, although no watching human would have believed it possible for the chitinous body to fit. Getting all eight limbs through proved the work of a second. His heavy thorax was more difficult, but he twisted and wiggled and succeeded.

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Escape! This did not seem to be another cell. For long minutes, he stood in darkness in the next compartment, trying to decipher the peculiar odors, and hearing sounds beyond his understanding.

He moved into the room and decided the soft, rhythmic sighing came from a sleeping human. Wiggling the antennae just above his eyes, he picked up a new smell—a scent of aberration.

He almost bolted and ran. He had entered the sleeping web of the human afflicted with madness! Why did they permit such defective units in their midst? No Kindarian would tolerate such deviant behavior in another.

He was a warrior of the Third Web, second hatching, highest elevation. He had been destined to greatness from the egg. It was his duty to kill all who violated the law of the web.

As he stood over the sleeping human, the one they called Gowan Liottey, a taloned hand reached out and lightly touched the burning-hot human's cheek. The talon's sharp edge moved lower to rest against an exposed, pulsing artery. A single slash of that deadly talon would end this miserable one's life.

But the warrior held back. This was the *Preceptor's* second-in-command, who would replace their demon captain if he were to die. To kill the one seized with madness was to defeat his own goals, he realized after a moment's reflection.

Kill the capable human captain, and this one, this defective officer, would assume command. He clacked his razor-edged mandibles at the thought and rubbed his antennae together with the first twinge of joy he had felt since being ripped from his scout ship. His plan to kill their captain and elevate this one in his stead was audacious and might redeem him in the heart of the Supreme.

“What the hell's going on in here? Alarms are ringing all over the damned ship.”

Lights flared and blinded the Kindarian. He threw up a protecting limb and spun to face the door. The guard had discovered him!

“Move, soft one, and I will slice this one's throat,” he croaked in his best imitation of human speech. The talon rested against Gowan Liottey's throat.

Only then did the sleeping first officer awaken. His blue eyes went wide, and he started to scream.

“Stay calm, Gowan,” the one called Tia Barse cautioned. “The bug got out of his cell.” Her gaze darted to the wall adjoining the infirmary and found the hole. “He chewed through, somehow. He’s not going to hurt you, or he would have done it by now.”

“Wrong,” the Kindarian cried. “I will slay without mercy.”

“Do it, and you die on the spot,” Barse snapped. She drew her laser pistol and aimed it at the alien.

He prepared to die, but he would take the recumbent Liottey with him. The talon pressed down and a bead of blood formed on the man’s throat.

“No, Barse, don’t let him!” Liottey whined.

“This is for the best, Gowan,” taunted Barse. She moved to get a better shot at the alien.

The Kindarian knew he was faster and had heard them comment on how spindly he looked. He was far stronger than any of the humans. She would try to cut off the strongest of his legs to keep him from attacking her. He shifted his carapace to make this difficult without risking that the shot would damage Liottey.

“Ever since you sniffed that CoolinGas, you’ve been one royal pain in the butt.”

“Tia!” pleaded Liottey. “Don’t! I—”

“You’re whining, Gowan. Stop it.” She took careful aim.

The Kindarian moved his talon slightly, to producing a red trickle down the first officer’s throat. A fraction of a millimeter more, and the carotid artery would be severed.

“Don’t sweat it, Gowan. The auto-med unit will repair the wound quickly enough if I have to shoot the bug. He’s smart enough to avoid me shooting him. He’s going to crawl back into his cage and not harm you.”

Eyes flashing and antennae restless, the Kindarian tried to estimate what value Liottey actually had. From scent and body set, the female had no respect for the hostage human’s abilities. He tried to integrate his other senses. The female had an active hatred for the male.

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The Kindarian reformed his plans. If he killed the human captain to install the one under his talon, the female might slay Liottey without a qualm.

Still, Tia Barse hesitated. The Kindarian understood the reason. He was the enemy, the alien. Even one spurned from the web ranked higher than any from another race.

“I saw the telltales going red,” came a deep, resonant voice. “When I couldn’t pick it up on vidscreen I came down. What’s going on?” Pier Norlin froze when he saw the tableau in front of him.

This complicated matters. To die without slaying the human captain meant added failure and disgrace. To kill a mere secondary officer of lesser value accomplished nothing.

“I’ll burn the bug, Cap’n,” Barse promised. “The auto-med unit can fix up Liottey.”

“Wait.” Norlin touched a stud on the com-link at his belt. “Don’t do anything.” He spoke directly to the Kindarian to stay the talon on his second officer’s throat. The Kindarian appreciated the acceptance of his rank, but he worried the demon captain only sought delay.

“Stay calm. What do you want?”

“Want?” This took him by surprise. He had not thought the captain of such a mighty ship would deign to negotiate. Humans continued to present him with unsettling puzzles. How could Pier Norlin face a significant element of the Kindarian Death Fleet and win, yet be willing to discuss the life of a single, lesser warrior? Especially an incompetent one such as Gowan Liottey?

The scents emitted by both of the other humans almost overwhelmed him with contempt—for their own crew member. He needed time to decide if this was a sensory mask cast by the humans to hide their true intentions and attacks. If only the Supreme had discovered more of their evolutionary path to better understand motivations, but until now, there had been no need. The Death Fleet crept past their crude sensors, destroyed what planetary defenses existed, looted the planet and moved on.

What need was there to understand such primitives?

“You think to trick me.”

“No,” said Norlin. “Barse, clear out. Get back to engineering.”

“I can burn the bug, Cap’n. I *can!*”

“That’s an order, Lieutenant. Shift out of here, now!”

The power struggle confused him. The female resisted an order from her superior. How was that possible? How was it not met with instant punishment? Perhaps he held a stronger tactical position than he thought, and this captain was not truly in command. As strange as it seemed, he might kill Liottey but in doing so remove the only bargaining wedge he had.

Barse grumbled and left, her pistol still centered on the Kindarian’s thorax all the way out of the infirmary.

When she had gone, Norlin said, “Don’t do anything hasty. Just stay calm.” He backed away and left. The door slid shut, leaving the warrior with his talon pressed into the terrified Liottey’s throat.

He was more perplexed than ever at their actions. The humans had simply...retreated. This made no sense.

He settled down to wait. Time rode heavily on him as he worked over the probabilities of success in his mind. The numbers shifted constantly and left him uncertain.

He hated that.

* * *

“No loss,” grumbled the tactical officer. Mitri Sarov swiveled back and forth in his chair, his powerful hands clenching and unclenching as if he had the brittle-appearing Kindarian’s throat in his grip. The feathery scars forming a faint web under his left eye pulsed with a pink inner glow. “Liottey never amounted to more than a red dwarf—lots of gas and no heat.”

“He’s an officer in this crew,” Norlin said somberly. “As such, we must try to save him. I agree he’s not the best officer in the Empire Service, but he belongs to us, to the *Preceptor*.”

“Dammit,” muttered the communications officer, Chikako Miza. The shaved sides of her head gleamed in the bright light of the control room. Her tall, dark, woven topknot shimmered with the com gear she had woven through it.

A vague expression crossed her face; then, the usual sharpness returned. Norlin wondered what tidbit of information had

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flashed through her com. When she didn't offer to tell him, he ignored it. Everyone aboard the *Preceptor* had pressing work to do that didn't reflect directly on their immediate problem.

"We rescue him...how?"

"Gas," came Tia Barse's voice over the com-link to the engine room. The engineer had retreated there and labored to keep the equipment functioning at peak.

"I can talk to him," spoke up Trahnee.

"Not yet," Norlin said to the dark-haired, grey-eyed woman. Trahnee was genhanced and controlled others with the subsonic pitching of her voice. Only she had been able to interrogate the prisoner properly; only she had worked out the coordinates of the Black Nebula from the alien's vague descriptions of star pattern.

"Why not? I turn on the intercom and speak to him. It is that simple. Unless you want to forfeit Liottey, of course."

"Let her do it. If it doesn't work, we can try the narcotic gas, as Barse suggested," said Sarov. The man's thick fingers worked on the keyboard at his console. Norlin knew different scenarios for attacking the hostage problem had been set up, and the tactical officer computed the course of action with the greatest chance of success.

"Do it," he said, deciding. He pointed to the com-link at his belt. Trahnee reached out and took it. Norlin couldn't help himself—her nearness excited him. He felt a thrill just having her fingers brush across his stomach on their way to the com-link.

"There is no hope," she said softly into the unit, not prefacing it with a greeting to the Kindarian as she had always done before to focus his attention. "Surrender. We will not harm you if you surrender and leave Liottey uninjured. You cannot triumph. Surrender...surrender...surrender."

Norlin saw Sarov struggling under the genhanced power of that suggestion; the bulky tac officer wanted to give up. Chikako Miza turned up whatever she listened to in her earpiece to drown out the Lorelei's seductive voice. Norlin shivered and threw off the hypnotic spell of her voice—he was partially immune to her power. Why, he did not know or care to find out. The others succumbed with varying degrees of ease.

"It's not working, Cap'n," came Barse's voice in his headphones. "The alien's got something stuffed into his ears, or whatever he uses to hear. Might be, he catches vibrations against the cilia on those spiky antennas—he's got 'em all tucked up under his carapace, out of sight. He's a smart one. He's learned how she can twist him up inside, like she's done with you."

"Lieutenant!" Norlin snapped.

"It's not working on him," muttered Barse, not chastised in the least.

Sarov shook his head. Trahnee's voice had failed to carry the day.

"Never mind," said Norlin. "We hit him with the narco gas. Do it, Barse."

"Done, Cap'n." For several seconds the engineer said nothing. Then: "That didn't work, either. He's got an oxygen bottle rigged up and is using it. He expected us to gas him, the clever bastard."

"Get RRUs going on the outer hull," said Norlin. "Drill through. Evacuate the section."

"What? Why?" demanded Trahnee. "That will kill Liottey, too. You didn't want that."

"The *Preceptor* is at risk," Norlin said. "The Kindarian is independent of our atmosphere, at least until the medical oxygen supply is exhausted. In that time, he can work up any number of explosive devices using the supplies in that compartment. I want to limit the time he has to think up such nastiness as well as keep him off balance worrying about the wrong things."

He turned and punched up a schematic of that portion of the *Preceptor* on the vidscreen. He used a small laser wand to point out the sections endangered if an internal explosion occurred.

"He can take out the main power line," said Trahnee. "That would require considerable explosive, though."

"He can do it with nothing more than the gases stored in the infirmary," said Chikako. "Mix and match them—boom!" She threw her hands up to indicate what could happen.

"Even if the alien did not attempt that," said Sarov, "the drugs and chemicals form a powerful arsenal. He can concoct explosives that will rip through our guts. I've closed blast doors fore and aft of the infirmary."

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Norlin nodded. He had a good crew. They protected the ship well.

“You can’t evacuate the infirmary. Liottey will die!” Trahnee protested.

“He’s an officer in the Empire Service,” said Sarov. “He knew he might die in combat.”

“*You’re* killing him,” the woman protested.

Sarov’s face went pale. His lower lip quivered.

“She’s right,” he said in an uncharacteristically shaky voice. “We can’t do this.”

For Sarov to act that way, she must have used her genetically enhanced persuasion. Norlin set the command wand to send shrill feedback into the tac officer’s headphones. Sarov reacted instantly. He threw his hands up to his ears to jerk away the source of the offending noise but then left the ’phones in place. He shot an angry look at Trahnee and turned back to his board.

“Do not influence my crew in that way,” Norlin ordered her softly. “We appreciate the gravity of the situation. You apparently do not. Saving Liottey is secondary to saving the *Preceptor*...and our own lives.”

“Let me go reason with the Kindarian. He listened before. He’ll do it again if I can just face him.”

“Barse says he has blocked out your voice by hiding those antennae. In a real sense, he is totally deaf. We must capitalize on this weakness, especially if he thinks it is his strength dealing with us.”

Norlin studied the progress of the robot repair units as they magnetically scampered along the hull to a spot just outside the infirmary. The reactive armor and heavy plating made drilling difficult—the *Preceptor* was a war vessel and designed to take substantial punishment before its hull was breached. The RRU’s might have to work for ten minutes or longer to bore through and explosively decompress the sealed compartment.

“They’re working, Cap’n,” came the engineer’s voice in his headphones. A sudden pop indicated Barse had switched to a private com frequency. “Do we really want to suck the bastard’s lungs out like this?”

“We do. You know what we’ve stored in that chamber. The alien can seriously damage us if he uses a chemical bomb.”

“Hell, he doesn’t even have to blow stuff up. Cap’n—he could overload our atmospheric filtration unit, he could set a phosphorus fire that might burn for days, he could—”

“Keep the RRUs at work, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n.”

Norlin looked at Trahnee. The woman’s stricken expression told of the stress on her. In that moment, he loved her even more.

He knew she didn’t care for Liottey—none of them did—but she had taken his part and sought a way for him to live. No one in the infirmary was likely to survive.

“Got a glitch, Cap’n. RRU number two broke down.”

“Keep the first unit working.”

“Takes longer.”

“Keep drilling,” Norlin ordered. He cursed the lack of working vidscreen pickup in the infirmary. They had set alarms while Liottey was in there; the vidcams had been moved to more important locations. The *Preceptor* needed a complete refit. They had been through too many battles and had accumulated too many scars.

Norlin smiled grimly. That applied to his crew, too. And to him. Too many battles, too many scars, not enough R&R or time to heal.

“Picking up strange noises in the infirmary,” said Chikako Miza. “Can’t place, them. They’re—”

“Status report,” Norlin snapped, interrupting the com officer. “How long before the RRU makes it through?”

“Another ten minutes, Cap’n. Unit two is completely dead. Fused circuit, I think. Have to do a complete overhaul to be sure.”

He cursed. The alien was up to something. The Kindarian had had eight minutes to fix the oxygen mask to his strange face then explore the cabinets and storage lockers in the infirmary. The alien was sufficiently advanced to know what a treasure trove of destructive capability it had blundered across.

Norlin knew he should have put the alien in a more secure compartment. Welding bars across the doorway had forced the Kindarian to seek other escape routes. How the alien had melted its way through the carbon composite wall was something that needed further study—if they managed to stop the escape without dying themselves.

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“Noise level picking up.”

Norlin checked the chronometer. Still more than nine minutes before the RRU bored through. He wished Trahnee had been successful or the narcotic gas had put the Kindarian to sleep. He felt the tension tightening his gut and sending his heart racing until he almost gasped for air. The *Preceptor* was at stake.

“It’s Liottey,” said Miza, her dark eyes widening in surprise. “He’s overcome the sleepy gas Barse pumped in. He...he’s going after the Kindarian!”

Norlin heard a bellow of rage that was scarcely human. A loud crash followed, and then came sounds of intense struggle.

“Barse, get into the infirmary. Take a laser rifle. Fry the alien. If Liottey gets in the way, too bad, but don’t let it escape.”

He grabbed a pistol from a rack by the door and tossed it to Trahnee as he rushed out. Norlin had no idea what was happening in the infirmary, but this might give them their chance to eliminate the alien and save Gowan Liottey.

Or doom them all.

Chapter Two

Gowan Liottey shrieked and blasted upward from his bed. Tubes sunk into his veins ripped free. Blood and healing solutions spewed across the infirmary. He never noticed. Probes taped to his body pulled over instruments fastened to a table beside his bed. He never felt the skin ripping slightly as the probes yanked free from his flesh.

The auto-med unit beeped a protest at such unseemly behavior from its patient then settled down to a constant one-note complaint.

Liottey heard and saw nothing but the Kindarian in front of him. The CoolinGas leak in the chamber where he had worked without a respirator had disrupted neural paths in his brain. Normally hesitant, Liottey's personality had changed to aggressive. He attacked the alien. His fingers raked like claws. He kicked and fought and ignored the alien's talons ripping and slashing his body.

Liottey's strong white teeth fastened on a spindly alien arm poking from beneath the creature's torso. Jaw muscles contracted and ripped open stiff body flesh. Liottey spat blood and chitin and kept attacking, bowling over the Kindarian with the sheer mindless fury of his attack.

“Cease, stop, I surrender!” the alien bellowed.

Liottey did not hear. His berserker rage knew no bounds. He grabbed the alien by the throat and jerked hard, trying to break the connection between thorax and head.

The Kindarian brought up four of his taloned hind walking limbs and tried to force the *Preceptor*'s first officer away. The effort failed. Liottey's insane strength kept the alien pinned to the deck and helpless.

“Gowan, stop!” came Norlin's sharp command. “You've beaten him. Stop. That's an order!”

Tia Barse joined Norlin in pulling the man off his victim. The Kindarian curled into an egg-shaped ball, shaking all over.

“Hold him,” ordered Norlin. He thrust his laser pistol under the Kindarian's face. The spider-like being was defeated. He stopped fighting.

“The doctors never predicted such a reaction,” murmured Trahnee from the doorway. She held her weapon clumsily, not wanting to use it. Norlin took it from her and trained it on the alien.

“Get up. We're putting you under constant surveillance. Barse, how's Liottey?”

“Collapsed. The burst of rage burned up his energy reserves. He's weak as a kitten now.” The engineer turned when she heard a loud purring sound. Around her feet wove a black cat with gray stripes in its tail and a spattering of brown along its belly. Barse's nose wrinkled.

Norlin took an involuntary step away from the methane-producing cat.

“I told you not to feed Neutron so much protein. He stinks worse every time I see him.”

“Flatulence can be used as a weapon,” Barse said. “Let me lock the cat up with the bug. That would definitely constitute cruel and unusual punishment—and deserved, to my way of thinking.”

She poked the Kindarian with the toe of her boot. The alien did not react. He had withdrawn completely into an ego-web and made no move to respond.

“My arms,” moaned Liottey. “My body. What's wrong? Why do I hurt so much?”

Norlin went to his first officer's side and knelt.

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“You just saved us a lot of trouble.”

Norlin and Barse both looked up just as the RRU laser drill cut through the hull.

Sudden decompression resulted. Norlin grabbed Trahnee and shoved her into the corridor away from the turbulence blowing out through the hole in the wall. Barse and Liottey managed to join them in the corridor. Only the Kindarian remained in the infirmary, tightly balled like a larva.

“We forgot to turn off the drill,” cried Norlin over the rush of air past him and through the infirmary. “Get the hatch closed.”

“We’ll kill the prisoner,” protested Barse. “We *need* him. I’ve got to find out about the alien star drive engines. And that rainbow ray weapon. And—”

“Close the damned door.” Norlin leaned past and cycled the infirmary door shut. The air loss continued. He cursed and went to the hatch to the Kindarian’s cell. Air gushed through the hole the alien had cut. Norlin shut off this chamber, too.

“Get the RRU to work fixing the hull,” he ordered Barse. “I want to reestablish pressure as quickly as possible. We might be able to save the Kindarian.”

Trahnee spoke quietly to Liottey, reassuring him, quieting him. In minutes, the first officer slumped and snored loudly.

Trahnee looked up at Norlin.

“He will sleep until I order him to awaken. It is for his own good. He is exhausted.”

“Did you get any idea out of him why he pinned the alien like he did? Liottey’s never shown much in the way of courage before.” Norlin snorted in contempt. The opposite was true. Gowan Liottey went out of his way to choose the path of least resistance—the course of maximum cowardice.

“The CoolinGas must have affected him in ways we didn’t anticipate. The doctors planetside did what they could with cortical transplants. This might signal a permanent change in his personality.”

“Courage we can use. Foolhardiness is a commodity we already have in abundance,” Norlin said.

“Pressure’s back, Cap’n,” reported Barse. “It didn’t take the RRU long to fix the hole—a quick melt seal did it. We can do permanent repairs at our leisure.”

“Leisure,” he scoffed. They had no time for leisure. From now until they defeated the Kindarians on their home world in the center of the Black Nebula, no one could expect the slightest respite.

“You worry too much, Cap’n. It’ll get done,” Barse promised.

He turned to Trahnee and Liottey. The first officer snored even louder now that the ship’s cat had crawled into the man’s lap, making a pillow of his leg.

“They will sleep for some time,” Trahnee said.

“You talked to the cat, too?”

She smiled and shook her head.

“I had no need of that. The cat does nothing but eat, sleep and—”

“Let’s get into the infirmary,” Norlin cut in. “I want to see if we’ve still got a prisoner.”

They found the Kindarian unfolding his eight limbs and stretching as if awakening from a long sleep. Its compound eyes stared expressionlessly at Norlin. He leveled the laserifle to let the spider-like being know escape was not possible.

His finger tensed on the weapon’s firing stud. Too many memories flooded back when he saw this creature. World after human world had been laid waste by the alien’s Death Fleet. A hard lump formed in Norlin’s throat as he remembered Neela Cosarrian, her sea-green eyes and laughing manner, and the love they had shared. She had died in a Kindarian attack.

He thought of the ruined worlds and mutilated people, and the battles he and the *Preceptor*’s crew had fought against the aliens. To kill this one meant little, but it would give him a sense of finally retaliating, of striking back.

“Do not,” Trahnee said softly. He felt the full intensity of her enhanced voice playing with his emotions, driving away the hurt and rage and restoring his sense of duty. This alien was worth more to the Empire Service alive than dead. Information was a rare commodity. He had the chance to find out needed details about the Kindarians—how they lived, how they died, why they attacked in their vicious, well-coordinated fashion.

“I won’t. The idea is tempting, though,” he admitted.

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He prodded the alien and checked him quickly. For all the sudden loss of atmosphere, it seemed none the worse for the decompression. Kindarians might appear fragile, even spindly, but they were tough. From personal experience, he knew they were also incredibly strong. This one had been wounded and still fought like ten men.

“Tell us how you feel,” urged Trahnee, kneeling beside the Kindarian.

The spider creature turned his dark compound eyes on her and said nothing.

“The loss of pressure might have ruptured his voice box,” said Norlin.

“He can speak,” Trahnee said positively. “I can feel the words trying to rush forth, to let us know what we seek.” She gently drew the alien’s antennae from their protective sheath in the carapace and stroked them. The way they quivered convinced Norlin the alien could hear.

If Trahnee was right, the Kindarian was hardly the worse physically for his escape attempt. Defeating his kind would be very hard, indeed.

“No,” the Kindarian croaked. “I will not tell you more. You cannot force me. Kill me! I want to die a warrior’s death!”

“Why do you pillage the planets like you do?” asked Norlin.

He had always wondered why the aliens slashed and burned and looted, making no attempt at colonization. The worlds they destroyed were prime, and planets capable of sustaining higher life forms were rare in the galaxy. More light years than he cared to think about separated the colonial worlds along the frontier.

“We do not deal with your kind,” the Kindarian said.

“Why not?” Trahnee asked in her softly seductive tone. Norlin felt the subsonics quiver and rattle inside his eardrums. Genetically enhanced, she had other talents he could only guess at. This one was obvious. Trahnee spoke, and others obeyed.

Norlin barely listened to the Kindarian’s response. His mind drifted back to first meeting Trahnee and her brother Bo Delamier. Insurrectionists, the pair of them. They had been banished from Emperor Arian’s court on Earth because they had sought his overthrow once too often.

Given all the stories he had heard about the emperor, Norlin wondered what the man was really like.

The genhanced officers he had met along the frontier had been demented. Usually brilliant but always showing a fatal flaw, they made life turn to death more often than not. Captain Pensky, for example, had commanded the *Preceptor* for less than a week. He had turned on his own ships and wrought havoc that permitted the Kindarian Death Fleet to destroy still another world.

In the middle of battle, though, Pensky had shown nothing less than genius in his tactics. Norlin occasionally reran the record of those brief encounters to study how Pensky had turned a single cruiser into the nemesis for a dozen ships, each with twice the *Preceptor's* firepower.

"You cannot be trusted," the alien said. His mandibles clacked ominously. Norlin snapped back to the moment and touched the aiming stud on the laserifle. A tiny red bead shone brightly against the Kindarian's thorax, showing the precise spot where the beam would slice through him.

"What do you mean?" asked Trahnee. "When have you tried to deal with humanity? Have you spoken with Emperor Arian or someone in his court? Have you been to the foot of the Crystal Throne and spoken with our leaders?"

"Crystal Throne? I do not understand. We do not have to talk to your face to know your treachery," the alien said. "Witnessing your destruction of other creatures unlike yourselves is enough evidence. The probability is high that you would have dealt with us in the same fashion."

"You decided to strike at us before we could attack you?" asked Norlin.

He granted that humanity's record of contact with other intelligent species had been dismal. Three other than humanity had been discovered; two were almost annihilated because of unfortunate misunderstandings. Their numbers now were few, and they seldom strayed from their homeworlds.

Still, this reaction struck him as overly paranoid on the Kindarians' part. The third race, the Prothasians, were small, furry beasts the emperor held in high esteem—or so read the reports Norlin had seen.

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From other things he had heard about Arian, he wondered about the nature of that esteem. Neither the other races nor any human settled world along the frontier enjoyed such attention.

“You are brutal. We saw high probability that you would kill us if we tried to negotiate.” The Kindarian crouched down and wrapped his spidery legs around his main body protectively.

Norlin didn’t know how to respond. These aliens had watched Earthmen conduct their affairs among the stars and had drawn a conclusion he might have himself. Earth sent vessels on their missions and direct scouting ventures into likely systems. The frontier worlds were too poor to expend such effort on a systematic basis—most frontier societies struggled under the burden of simply colonizing vast and empty worlds, often forced to extensively terraform more dangerous planets. Even the hospitable worlds carried dangers that required correction.

Empire Service exploratory ships fired first and talked later—the worlds along the star frontier had protested this often. It did no good.

Still, Norlin had to admit that not many colonists would argue too loudly against extermination of an alien race. They had come from the inner worlds and jealously protected their own planets from both new human and potential alien immigration. Such isolationism left any real opposition to the Kindarians up to the empire.

“If I assume you’re right in your assessment of us, and I’m not...” Norlin shot a quick look at Trahnee. He couldn’t read the expression on the genhanced woman’s face, but he caught a flicker of amusement behind those grey eyes. She and the emperor shared much in their notions of entertainment, he concluded. “If we assume you’re right, why are you so systematically looting our worlds? Why not attack and colonize?”

“That is not our way. We must eradicate. That is Kindarian destiny. It is beneath us to grub about like you do.”

The prisoner made a choking noise. Norlin thought the creature had something caught in his throat until he saw the mandible clacking and the leg twitching that went along with the sound.

“He exhibits extreme hostility,” Trahnee said needlessly. “He is contemptuous of us.”

“He might be scornful,” said Norlin, “but we captured him. We destroyed his ship along with many more in his flotilla.”

“The Death Fleet will continue to cut through your civilization until you are brought to your knees.”

“You’ve declared war on us?” Norlin was puzzled by the Kindarian’s reaction.

“War? We do not understand war. We defend ourselves. We live as the Supreme intends those of Kindar to live. Any other lifestyle is beneath our contempt.” The alien’s haughtiness convinced Norlin they weren’t likely to get new information.

“Any more?” he asked Trahnee.

“What do you want from him? He will be...amenable,” she said. He felt the vibrancy in her voice. She wanted to toy with the prisoner, to force him to speak against his will. In her way, Trahnee delighted in baiting the Kindarian. If she played with the alien’s mind, Norlin wondered whether Emperor Arian would go further and indulge his reputed sadistic tendencies with physical torture, for the amusement of his court.

He would do more than just ask questions, Norlin suspected.

Norlin motioned for Trahnee to leave. The Kindarian glared at them, his eyes flashing with a million facets of reflected hatred. Norlin touched his com-link.

“Barse, make sure our elusive friend doesn’t try to wander again. Put a couple robots on patrol in the corridor and in compartments around him. I don’t give a damn if he tries to chew his way into space.”

“It might be for the best, Cap’n. How long we going to coddle him?” came the engineer’s immediate response.

“We need him,” Norlin said. “The emperor has to see something substantive to support our reports of an alien death fleet.”

“Let him see the worlds they’ve ruined,” grumbled Barse.

Norlin clicked off his com-link. He paced the corridor slowly, each step echoing like a peal of a funeral bell.

“Emperor Arian might not have received any of the messages sent,” Trahnee said. “He is very...unreceptive on some topics. This would be one, I fear.”

“Admiral Bendo sent no fewer than a dozen message packets to Earth, all filled with documentation of the Kindarian

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invasion,” said Norlin. “My reports on the first depredations have been circulated widely along the frontier.”

“I am sure the report has reached the emperor’s court,” Trahnee said. “That does not mean anyone took it seriously.” She laid her hand on his shoulder. He stopped. Her eyes bored into his pale-violet ones. “Do you think Emperor Arian will look at your captive and agree to invasion of the Black Nebula?”

“He has to,” Norlin said. “The frontier has no other chance for survival. *Earth* has no other chance.” Hope eluded him that any of the emperor’s engineered advisors would agree.

Chapter Three

Enemy ships closing fast! Array of genius missiles on their way! We're heading into a passive mine field!" Pier Norlin snapped out the problems as he tapped them into his command computer. His heads-up display helmet flashed red warnings all around him.

A small movement of his chin turned off the mock display. He turned and stared at his communications officer as she fought to detect all the incoming missiles.

Chikako Miza's scalplock glowed with red and green and amber. Some nanowires ran directly into her head, finding neural connector points in her brain to give instant linkage with her equipment. Other wiring went to transmitters cunningly hung as jewelry from ears and throat. Chikako was a living com-link. But he was often overloaded simply with visual displays. Didn't so much direct input confuse her?

As she put every circuit at her disposal to work on the tactical problem, she spoke quietly and steadily. Her fingers worked across her com board as she did the work of a half-dozen officers. Direct connect, auditory and tactile—her command and control tripled what Norlin achieved.

From her board poured the flood of data Mitri Sarov needed to counter the threat to the *Preceptor*. The tactical officer cast a

huge shadow across his controls as he hunched forward, thick fingers punching and tuning, probing and gently coercing impossible defenses from the ship's active combat systems.

"Got trouble, Cap'n," came Tia Barse's voice in Norlin's headphones. "Tickler unit is acting up. We can't excite the fusion torch enough to up the power to fire the radiation cannon. If we try, we'll blow everything across the board."

"Compensate," Norlin ordered Sarov. "We can't use the radiation cannon. Lay down a defensive barrage. If we run, they'll turn us into expanding gas in seconds."

"Done."

Norlin wondered what would excite Sarov. The man never showed emotion at his post. Only during the card games with Barse did he betray any agitation. Barse always beat him—he owed her months of pay. Norlin wanted to tell him to use the same emotional control during combat when he played. That way, Barse couldn't read him as easily as she did.

Norlin shrugged it off. Losing at cards might be Sarov's way of relieving tension. He dared not make a mistake in situations like this one. Even though computers did most of the work—they had the femtosecond response times humans lacked—an organic brain had to guide and provide the inspiration rather than imitating his computers with their soulless prognostications.

Sarov was the best Norlin had seen during his limited time in the Empire Service. He was glad he had him for tactical officer.

He smiled crookedly. He was glad he had them *all*, even Gowan Liotey, although that stretched his acceptance to the breaking point. The *Preceptor* had been a prize when he gained command of it by outliving the other line officers. Although he had lacked experience, he had the flare for command that kept such diverse personalities welded together as a team—and alive.

So far.

"We can power up the lasartillery now.," Barse reported. "Still can't use the radiation cannon. We've got problems with the switching circuit."

Norlin worked his controls, adding new problems to the exercise. Having Sarov use the lasartillery seemed appropriate;

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he wanted to see if the tac officer was depending too much on the captured Kindarian radiation cannon.

New parameters for the battle problem flashed across Norlin's vidscreen. He added and subtracted to give the entire crew a complete test of their abilities. To his surprise, even Gowan Liottey responded well.

The first officer's usual role was life support systems maintenance, a job normally filled by robots during combat. Liottey had so few other talents, Norlin had thought it safer to keep him occupied with routine tasks.

No longer. Liottey worked to full potential now with robots on the life support system and evaluating expertly what damage required immediate attention and what repairs could be postponed. The RRU's had never been handled better, even by Tia Barse.

Norlin smiled when he saw the ninety-five-percent confidence levels returning for Liottey, Barse and Chikako Miza. Mitri Sarov tallied a full ninety-seven percent, better than all but a handful of officers in the Empire Service.

When the *Preceptor* went into the Black Nebula to hunt Kindarians and locate their homeworld, the ship would be more than a match for anything the aliens threw in their orbit.

Norlin ran a few new problems by them to compound the difficulty of the combat test. They responded well. One by one, the red lights turned amber and finally winked a green to indicate successful termination.

"Cap'n, you still running a test on me or is the tickler really showing instability in its output?" Tia Barse's voice told him that the question—and problem—was real.

"Test is terminating now," he said, removing the last of the ersatz alien warships from the computer. Space around them for dozens of light minutes was free of any other vessel. He checked his master readout then moved his chin switch to get more comprehensive details. Barse had picked up a small output problem at its inception.

"Still got it, Cap'n. What do you want me to do?"

"All hands, all hands," he said. "Full repair authorized. If you've got any glitches, erase them. Barse, divert however many RRU's you need for repair."

“Sir, do you want the robots standing guard over the Kindarian diverted to the engine compartment?” came Liottey’s question. The confidence in his voice startled Norlin. He was used to a whining, self-deprecating tone from the first officer.

“What are you suggesting, Mr. Liottey?”

“Let Barse have the RRUs. I’ll watch the prisoner. He seems afraid of me after my outburst.”

Norlin touched the computer toggle to get Liottey’s medical readout. A quick scan revealed the man’s vitals. Gowan Liottey had recovered past his recorded norms.

“Do so,” Norlin said, glad to be able to shift some command responsibility to his first officer. Even an automated ship like the *Preceptor* needed humans to keep it functioning. Sharing the authority for routine procedures rather than tending to it all himself allowed him to prepare for the battles to come.

He wasn’t sure entering the Black Nebula and fighting the Kindarian Death Fleet was the hardest part of the one-sided war, either. First, he had to take the cruiser to Earth and convince Emperor Arian of the threat. That might prove more difficult than anything he had yet undertaken.

“I’m almost at maximum efficiency,” reported Sarov. “There’s not much more I can do with this setup of computers and control equipment.”

“Any chance for improvement with a different configuration?” asked Norlin. He’d heard the tiny quiver of plaintive request in Sarov’s voice. The tac officer wanted to make changes to their system. Empire Service regulations were precise on this point—it was never to be done. To allow one ship to alter fire control systems meant chaos during coordinated, close-fleet maneuvers.

“Do what you want, Mitri,” Norlin said. Central command relaying orders from distant Earth would prove suicidal in real combat with the Kindarian fleet; the time delay, the high-command arguments over tactics, the political infighting for access to the emperor had to be circumvented. He saw no reason it should not start with his ship. Now.

“Barse, what’s the condition of the radiation cannon?”

He knew this weapon, more than anything else aboard the *Preceptor*, elevated them above Empire Service standards and strategy. They had taken the Kindarian radiation cannon from a

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damaged scout ship after an engagement but had been unable to use it except as a one-shot weapon because of the drain it put on their power system. A chance battle in the Porlock system had given them the switch the Kindarians used to prevent the massive power depletion. Theirs now matched the armament of the smaller ships in the Kindarian Death Fleet.

Norlin tried not to think of the massive planet wreckers the aliens had. Those outgunned the heaviest ships in the Empire Service fleet.

The engineer's voice came crisply in his headphones.

"In perfect condition, Cap'n. You want a test firing?"

"Not until your engines are at full capacity," he said.

"We're almost there. The RRUs Liottey freed up are about finished. We're in damned good shape."

"Pleased to hear it," Norlin said dryly. He lounged back in the command chair and relaxed for the first time in longer than he could remember. Command weighed heavily on him. As far as he knew, the *Preceptor* was the only cruiser to engage in single combat with the alien death fleet and survive. Entire planets had died. Only when Admiral Bendo drew the line at Sutton and fought with both ground and space forces did the Death Fleet meet its match.

He watched the command computer race through systems checks. Everything was in perfect condition. How long would this last once they engaged the Death Fleet again? Not long, he knew, but they would cut a swath all the way to the Kindarians' homeworld in the Black Nebula.

"Let's set course for Alpha Centauri," he said.

He looked over his shoulder. Trahnee nodded agreement with his decision. Alpha Centauri was the oldest of Earth's colonies and provided a gateway to the home solar system—Emperor Arian ordered destroyed any vessel entering Earth space without permission.

Norlin had another reason for not going directly to Earth. He wanted to see if Trahnee and her brother had been forgotten. He had never pressed the woman to learn why she had been exiled to the frontier rather than executed outright for inciting a revolt to overthrow Arian. He knew he might find out the hard way, blundering through the political maze that Earth had become, but for now ignorance was preferable. Broaching the sub-

ject made him very nervous. He loved Trahnee and did not like the idea that she was a traitor to the empire.

“Shift engines ready?”

He received confirmation from Barse. A quick survey of the others showed the *Preceptor* was ready. He locked in the destination, and the powerful shift engines jerked them out of normal space and into the nothingness between dimensions that allowed faster-than-light travel.

“We’re on our way,” he said, more to himself than to Trahnee and his crew.

“We will convince Arian,” Trahnee assured him. “I need to speak to him personally, but he will be convinced of your need.”

“It’s not *my* need,” Norlin said irritably. “The Kindarians are pillaging *all* worlds. I still don’t understand why they destroy and rush on the way they do—it’s enough that they do it. This isn’t something for just the frontier worlds to worry over. It’s for the emperor. After all, he’s supposed to be in charge.”

He didn’t like Trahnee’s answering sardonic laugh.

* * *

“We’re cleared for entry,” Chikako Miza announced. “I’m picking up a loud signal, though. I don’t like it.”

“What’s the nature of the signal?” asked Norlin, more intent on recognition codes and finding the proper traffic clearance plans for the space station circling Alpha Centauri V. The worlds of this star system were uniformly barren. Three-hundred-eighty years of planetary reconstruction had only started turning the fifth rocky, lifeless globe into a livable site.

Circling the world was the largest station Norlin had ever seen, however. Supporting such a base required more effort than colonizing a dozen worlds along the frontier.

“I’ve tuned a receiver for the Kindarian frequencies. That’s one of their squeals. There’s a microburst transmission being sent from inside this system, Captain.”

Norlin cancelled the swiftly changing approach information the computer was furnishing and concentrated on Chikako’s com board. The readouts confirmed all she had said. They were picking up tiny leakages from Kindarian broadcasts.

“They’re here already,” he said, tiredness descending over him like a thick, suffocating blanket. He had hoped the heart

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of the empire would be immune from the aliens' overwhelming devastation.

"The exterior sensors are theirs," said Sarov. "I've identified no fewer than five they have replaced. Their method of attack is unchanged."

"Why not?" Norlin slumped even more in the command chair. "They've got a blueprint that works. Replace the sensors, lull the stupid humans into believing we're invincible, then sneak in. By the time forces can be rallied, the bulk of the Death Fleet is turning radiation cannon on the worlds and whatever defenders have reached space."

"I can alert the space station," said Trahnee. "I can *make* them believe there is danger."

"Try," he said, but he didn't think she would be successful.

After the controller refused to patch her through to his superior, Norlin knew what they had to do.

"We're breaking off. We're going alien hunting. Chikako, drop a message packet onto the com officer aboard the space station. Mitri, microburst a complete analysis of the Kindarian attack model to their battle ops officer. Barse, get us ready for combat. Full power on the engines. We'll need it."

"What do we do with the prisoner?" came from Liottey.

"Chain him up. I need you on the bridge, Gowan."

"Aye, sir. Right away. I've found a three-oh-four carbon steel his digestive juices can't corrode."

"Lock him up and get here immediately."

Trahnee put her hand on his shoulder.

"Let me try once more. I might be able to sway the controller."

"No," he said. "There's a filter on the circuit. Your particular talent doesn't affect him." He saw the sorrow on her face. He shucked the command helmet and kissed her quickly. "Stay on the bridge. We might have to contact other Empire Service ships. We can use all the help we can get tracking down the Kindarian scout ships infiltrating the system."

"So close to Earth," she said, heaving a deep sigh. "I am sorry now that Bo and I were not more successful in our attempts to overthrow Emperor Arian. Bo enjoyed war games. We would have had patrols out constantly."

Norlin didn't know how to answer her.

He put the command helmet back on and began laying in a course that would take them sweeping across the Alpha Centauri system then through the interface space between Alpha and the M-class red dwarf Proxima almost ten thousand AUs distant. Norlin checked the positions of the sensor posts and cursed. The standard dispersion pattern had been used, making their location an easy target for the Kindarian scouts.

“We know where to look,” Chikako pointed out, almost as if she had read his mind. “What works for them works for us, too.”

“Optimal course,” Norlin said, finishing the trajectory through the system. “Keep a sharp eye out for any sign of their scout ships.”

To his surprise, Gowan Liottey made the first reading on an enemy ship.

“Less than five light-minutes away, Captain,” the first officer barked out. “There’s a sensor planted on the cometary object. The Kindarian is hiding behind it, keeping the bulk of the ice between us and him.”

“How did you get it?” asked Norlin. Neither Chikako nor Sarov had picked up any radiation leaks from the other ship.

“Heat profile,” came the immediate answer. “The Kindarian ship melts part of the comet. The shimmer of water vapor indicates a higher temperature than should exist. The scout has to be hiding behind the snowball.”

“It might be an anomaly,” said Chikako Miza.

“Then let’s check it out for its scientific value,” Norlin said.

Less than a minute later the mass spectrometer picked up tell-tale exhaust products from a Kindarian engine.

“Got him,” said Sarov. “Caught sight of his nose as he edged around the comet head to sneak a look at us.”

“Prepare for battle,” Norlin said softly.

His heart raced, but he kept himself under control. To lose now meant the entire system would fall. From here it was an easy 4.2 light-year jaunt to Earth. He flipped a toggle and got a com-link with the Alpha Centauri space station. Chikako nodded, indicating he had an untappable laser linkage. He spoke quickly as he relayed the situation on the outskirts of the system.

“...can’t dignify that with a response, *Preceptor*,” came the choppy reply. “Enemy? Alien invasion? We get space dust like that

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all the time from the colonies. There's no evidence other than you going crazy."

Norlin switched to vidscreen circuit and relayed the image of the alien scout ship edging around the comet. As he did so he saw not one but two Death Fleet ships.

"We've got a fight on our hands. Get us support immediately." He toggled off before the space station controller could reply.

"There's three of them!" Chikako Miza cried out.

Pier Norlin said nothing. He worked feverishly on his command computer to ready the *Preceptor* for battle. He entered the last of his combat orders none too soon. Missiles snaked across space toward them, and laser beams sought their hull.

The war for human survival had begun.